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SUBJECT: MILITARY ERROR IN CAJAMARCA CAUSES 5 CIVILIAN DEATHS

Classified By: Amb. William B. Wood Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (U) On the night of April 10 in the municipality of Cajamarca, Tolima department, soldiers from the Pijoas Battalion of the Colombian Army's Sixth Brigade killed five civilians -- including a 6-month-old infant -- who soldiers mistook in the dark for FARC guerrillas. Cajamarca is an area with high levels of guerrilla activity, and at the time of the shooting the Army was engaged in an operation against the FARC's 21st and 50th Fronts, which operate in the region. According to the military, the civilians, who were spotted on a rural highway, refused soldiers' orders to halt and were shot after they began to run.

[1](#)2. (U) On April 11, Army Commander General Martin Orlando Carreno and Fifth Division Commander Brigadier General Hernan Alonso Ortiz arrived at the scene, as did prosecutors and criminal investigators from the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia") and local representatives of the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman ("Defensoria"). The military justice system also has begun an investigation of the incident. That same day, Armed Forces Commander General Carlos Alberto Ospina publicly acknowledged military responsibility for the deaths and offered condolences to the victims' family.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: The Army's quick acknowledgement of responsibility for this tragedy stands in sharp contrast to the Air Force's obfuscation and procrastination in the aftermath of the 1998 bombing of the village of Santo Domingo, Arauca department, an incident that remains a painful human rights thorn in the GOC's side. So far, the military's reaction to this case is reminiscent of its response to the August 2000 Pueblo Rico massacre, in which soldiers accidentally shot six children during combat with National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas in Antioquia department. The Army's transparency in that case is the primary reason the tragedy is now almost forgotten, and the military appears -- wisely -- to be using its successful management of that case as a useful precedent. Embassy will continue to follow developments in the military and civilian investigations of this latest incident. End comment.

WOOD